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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a basic framework for using creative drama to achieve a wide range of objectives in educating students with mental disabilities; these objectives include enhanced communication skills, discipline and teamwork, self-concept, and creativity. Drama techniques such as movement exercises, games, structured play, role playing, and sociodrama can be employed to expand environments and increase experiences of these students. In creative dramatics, the teacher's role is to be a leader with a cooperative style and an open attitude. Before beginning creative dramatics exercises, it is helpful to take a few minutes for relaxation and warm-up exercises. The creative drama process begins with defining a basic movement, adding improvisation, forming small groups, introducing a problem, combining the groups, adding conflict, introducing vocalization, and developing a complete improvisation. Ideas for creative drama must come from the class and be of interest to the class; its characters and situations can arise from curricular areas, personal interactions, social situations, and job problems. Though creative dramatics is a spontaneous rather than prearranged art form, students can sometimes benefit greatly from sharing their accomplishments in a public performance. (JDD)

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Chapter Eleven

Creative Drama

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OVERVIEW

While all students can benefit from drama activities in the classroom, creative drama's unique avenues for learning are especially suited to students with mental disabilities. Opportunities to exercise individual creativity are coupled with the social interactions of cooperative group work in a process that is enjoyable for all. Drama as an educational technique accommodates individual differences by allowing students to express themselves uniquely in non-competitive, success-oriented situations.

Some special educators working with students with mental disabilities have certain degrees of drama experience in their backgrounds. While training in drama and theatre is a desirable feature, of course, a teacher's willingness to experiment can be much more important toward successful incorporation of creative dramatics in the classroom. As with other content areas, tasks need to be broken down to their smallest units with sufficient time allotted for students to accomplish each stage. This chapter provides a basic framework for using creative drama to achieve a wide range of objectives, including enhanced communication skills, discipline and teamwork, self-concept, and creativity.

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

From the beginning of separate education for students with mental disabilities, drama techniques such as movement exercises, games, structured play, role playing, and sociodrama have been employed to expand environments and increase experiences of these students. Historically, the goals of these activities have been largely therapeutic and unrelated to the art form from which they are adapted. More recently, however, creative dramatics has been successfully used in special education classes to pursue artistic, personal, and educational goals. Several texts (Gillies, 1973; Lilley, n.d.; McCaslin, 1984; Shaw & Stevens, 1979; Shaw, Stevens, & Parks, 1981; Theatre Arts for the Handicapped, 1983) offer direction for special educators who are either beginning or extending their work in creative dramatics.

Anyone who works closely with young people cannot help but be aware of their dramatic propensities. Just as children crawl before they walk, children need to play before they assume adult responsibilities. Through play, children experiment with new situations, learn to understand the world around them, and enjoy themselves all at the same time. Creative drama channels this play energy into the dramatic elements of movement, sound, characterization, and dialogue to promote growth and learning. A creative drama leader assists individuals to explore and communicate ideas and feelings. Additionally, mathematics, science, reading or other curricular areas can provide starting points for creative dramatics activities. Arts for Learning (1983) and McIntyre (1963) present concrete ideas for using drama to stimulate and direct other content areas of instruction.

Creative drama differs from--and is often confused with--other theatre activities. A committee of Children's Theatre Association of America (recently changed to American Association of Theatre for Youth) defined creative drama as "an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-oriented form of drama in which

participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon experiences, real or imagined" (Rosenberg & Prendergast, 1983). Although it may result in a presentation to an audience, creative drama begins without a script, pre-set plot, or stage directions. The objective is to promote growth and development of the participants, not to put on a successful performance. Although participation in creative dramatics is certainly therapeutic, the process does not strive for therapeutic goals. Drama therapy, as practiced by trained therapists registered with the National Association for Drama Therapy, differs in both content and intent from creative drama. Because creative dramatics does not depend on artistic achievement or therapeutic outcomes, teachers without specialized training as theatre directors or therapists can readily and safely become involved.

BEST PRACTICES

Students' activity in creative dramatics is never judged as wrong; each person's contribution is accepted and respected as an expression of individual creativity and imagination. Since the process begins without any pre-set direction or outcome, all movements and sounds are automatically correct. As a result, there is security for all participants. Perhaps the most important rule for teachers to follow is that they should not impose structure or expectations on the activity, avoiding all negative evaluation.

The Teacher as Leader

The teacher working in creative dramatics is called a "leader," whose primary responsibility is to provide an atmosphere where learning can take place. A cooperative style and an open attitude is the key, and is far more important than any specified knowledge or training. The leader must insure that all participants become involved and that their contributions are accepted without challenge or criticism. Respect for each person's contributions is essential. The leader is a member of the group, supplying support for activities from within. While the leader defines boundaries of the performing space (the whole classroom, or a taped off area) and initiates the activity, the ideas, direction and development of the dramatic activities come from the students.

The Creative Drama Process

It is best to begin a creative drama exercise in a gradual way, perhaps by using a familiar activity. Take a situation where students need to move, such as lining up for lunch. Ask them to line up as elephants, and line up (as an elephant) with them. Begin to see who does what, how they do it, and how you feel participating with them. Expand to improvisation (composing without preparation)--do something as an elephant. Explore the space in which you are working. See the objects in your space in a new way. Feel objects with the back of your hand, simulating the way an elephant feels with the thick skin of his trunk. Alter the lighting by turning off lights or pulling shades. Introduce sounds, such as music or unusual noises. Add props such as boxes to walk around or through. Crumple paper on the floor, first as quicksand to be avoided and then as the only solid ground to walk on. Perhaps an elephant has the hiccups, needs to scratch an itch behind the left ear, or is looking for food to eat.

The next step is group activity, which integrates the individual creative efforts of the students. Participants continue to do their own thing, without imposed

structure or threat of criticism, yet they do so as a group effort that creates a whole. By working individually with assured success, students express their individuality, explore creatively, find pleasure in the activity, and develop self-esteem. When group work is added to the process children learn experientially how to work cooperatively and to get along with others. Social skills develop and mature in a safe, success-oriented atmosphere.

Begin group work in twos and threes. Three elephants must get through the quicksand together. They must help each other because one of them is too afraid to move or has a bad cold and is feeling ill, or can't see the obstacles. Let these small groups form and reform at will with the leader always part of the activities. As students become comfortable working with a partner or partners expand the groups. Now half the elephants are on one side with the other half trying to keep them from crossing the space. Now the African elephants with their fan-shaped ears are needed to help the Asian elephants conceal their identity from a hunter looking for Asian elephants. Eventually, the groups merge into one unit working together on a common problem.

Vocalization is the next step. There may be sounds and words from the students in activities leading up to this point, but as confidence, safety, and trust are established the leader should start encouraging all students to vocalize. Often, this is most safely initiated in a group setting with sounds. Sounds, as opposed to words, allow verbal and nonverbal, shy and outgoing students to participate equally. If some students are still reticent or unable to participate, encourage them to add a sound within their capabilities with which they are comfortable. This might be a shuffling of feet, a tapping of fingers, or a noise using an orthopedic appliance.

Eventually, each student or small group of students can be encouraged to create different sounds. Hiss, roar, click, stomp or any other sound, are equally valued and appropriate. The leader or various students can then direct the sounds to create patterns. If able, the class can assign sounds to characters: elephants who are babies or wise old leaders, ill or healthy, angry or frightened. Sounds can also be created for the environment, such as strong winds or the noises of other animals. A story can then be created which fits the sounds. As needed, the leader can help guide the creation of the story, possibly following a known plot from an existing story or play, until the participants create their own directions for the action.

With the participants physically and vocally involved and working together the dramatic activity can lead to fully developed improvisations that have a beginning, a middle, and end as a conflict is presented and resolved. Let's return once more to the elephant example. At the beginning, let's say, a group of Asian elephants who are peacefully going about their lives learn that there is danger; a hunter is after them. They need to ask some nearby African elephants to help them hide. How can we distinguish Asian from African elephants? Do they move differently? Do they make different sounds? Since elephants can not speak, how will the Asian elephants communicate their plight? How can the African elephants protect the Asian elephants from the hunter? Surround them so they are hidden? Disguise them somehow? Create a diversion? To develop the characters and solve the problem, the elephants must work together, probably using a combination of solutions presented by group members. As one of the elephants, the leader helps to solicit and to draw out ideas from the others.

Once the elephants develop their strategy for protection, a heightening of the conflict can occur by introducing a crisis. Perhaps an Asian elephant sneezes or trips and falls, potentially exposing the elephants being hunted. This danger may be the result of movement or sound emerging from the participants, or the leader might need to be the one who makes a conspicuous noise or movement. At the same time, then, another adult or a student taken into confidence suddenly appears in a hunter's cap. The dramatic climax is now at hand. What will the elephants do? They have nowhere to run to, and they can no longer hide. Will they try to trick the hunter? Perhaps they can direct his attention somewhere else? Can they get him to give up his rifle? Maybe they can scare him? Is it possible to get him to change his ways? Might he be convinced to become a friend to the elephants? By resolving this challenge, the participants complete the drama. By working together and using the contributions of all members, they are able to save the day and return to their peaceful existence.

The basic steps of creative dramatics, beginning with simple movements and proceeding through a complete dramatic improvisation, are contained within the foregoing elephant exercise:

1. Define a basic movement.	Line up as elephants.
2. Add improvisation.	Explore the environment, avoid quicksand, hiccup.
3. Form small groups.	Move together, discover one another's differences.
4. Introduce a problem.	Help each other through quicksand.
5. Combine the groups.	All elephants work together.
6. Add conflict.	A hunter is looking for Asian elephants.
7. Introduce vocalization.	Make elephant sounds, separating ages and types.
8. Develop a complete improvisation.	Seek protection from the hunter, confront his arrival, and resolve the conflict.

Initiating Creative Drama Exercises

Ideas for creative drama must come from the class and be of interest to the students or they will not elicit interest, enthusiasm, and active involvement necessary for success. If the characters and conflicts they face are too simple, boredom quickly settles in. If too complex, frustration results. Elephants confronting a ruthless hunter will not capture the imagination of all groups.

Additional ideas for creative dramatics are limitless. Robots, for instance, can be created. Perhaps each can perform only one sort of task. Can we discover what that is? How can we get two of the robots to combine their functions to create a third? Might a group of robots try to take over the world? How can the humans stop them? Participants can become animals and machines, real or imagined people, or

objects we see every day. The conflicts they encounter can be close to home or safely removed from the students' own personal needs and social interactions.

Creative dramatics is often most valuable when its characters and situations arise from other curricular areas. A mathematics problem, after all, often poses a conflict that must be understood and resolved. Groups of students can be added to, subtracted from, divided, or multiplied. Perhaps they need to trade a certain amount of "gold" for each of the three sections of a treasure map. In response to a science lesson, participants might change from ice to water to steam. Let's say those who are ice want to convert to water. Could they get together with the steam people who have a similar desire? A language lesson can be reinforced with characters who can make only one sound each. "Tuh, tuh, tuh," says one student, imploring his fellows to find objects around the room that start with that sound. They, in turn, point to "table," "trash" can, his own "toe," and the "teacher." As a variation on the exercise, students might create a "tent" to sit in, a spinning "top" to play with, or a "tree" to climb. Equipped with only the beginning or end sounds of words, students can search for another person with whom they can form a word: "pen" meets "sul," "pay" meets "per," and so forth.

Personal interactions, social situations, and circumstances that may occur on a job offer excellent sources for improvisations. One character doesn't seem to be liked by the group. Why is that? What can we do to help her? Another feels like a complete failure; how can the group help him to feel successful? A third is applying for a job. What questions should we ask her to see if she is qualified? In these situations the techniques of sociodrama are often used. Whereas in creative drama the teacher (leader) participates within the students' own resolution of a conflict, sociodrama calls for the teacher to direct desired outcomes from outside the group through discussion and role playing. Sociodrama generally involves more discussion, and outcomes are controlled more firmly by the teacher.

When improvisations grow from curricular or social concerns, they provide experiencial reinforcement for other teaching techniques. Educational television and other media have long used animation and dramatizations to add interest and enjoyment to their teaching. Creative dramatics takes this one step further by adding participation, personal exploration, and social interaction to the process.

Controlling Student Behavior

Well planned and flexibly guided improvisations generally sustain the interest and cooperation of the students but even the best efforts can get out of hand. The leader needs to control inappropriate behaviors, but when possible, this control should be exerted within the context of the activity. Jennings (1973) presents excellent ideas to help leaders maintain control without sacrificing the necessary freedoms and permissions of the exercise. In one cowboy improvisation with a group of speech students, the pupils began to get out of control. Jennings became the sheriff and shot them all down. That was not the end of the improvisation, however, as one of the students whispered to the sheriff to bury them and then to say prayers. After the "funeral" was complete, the group arose and became ghosts haunting the sheriff. Another technique used by Jennings and many other creative dramatists for control as well as changing focus or pace is a sound cue which has been introduced to the

students ahead of time. When the cue is heard, all action stops. The cue can be simply the word "freeze" or the beat of a drum. This type of cuing is very helpful in creative dramatics and should be introduced early in the group's experiences.

Warm-Up Exercises

Before beginning creative dramatics exercises it is helpful to take a few minutes for relaxation and warm-up exercises. Professional actors know the value of these techniques and use them consistently. Leaders find that helping the group to relax and warm-up provides a transition from preceding activities and stimulates involvement in the creative process. Numerous activities are available, including stretching and movement exercises, group improvisations, pairing off to mirror another's movements, and so forth. Begin with simple movement and vocalization and gradually work up to the point at which the new lesson is to begin. Several of the texts listed at the end of this chapter contain excellent relaxation and warm-up ideas. Theatre Games File by Viola Spolin (1975) contains hundreds of warm-up exercises especially suitable for disabled individuals, as well as ideas for initiating creative dramatics activities.

Performing for an Audience

A natural progression of dramatic activity is toward public performance (i.e., theatre). However, theatre performance implies a prearranged art form, whereas creative dramatics is a spontaneous art. Sometimes it becomes advantageous to move creative dramatics participants into a situation with an audience. It might be that one lesson develops so exquisitely that it deserves to be duplicated and shared or that the students are at a stage where they can benefit greatly from sharing their accomplishments. Preteens and teenagers, especially, crave constant recognition. Further, the motivation to be in a play can have the added benefit of decreasing behavior problems.

An informal audience might be found in the class next door or from the school staff or parents of participants. A more formal audience demands a more formal performance, but this may not be essential to provide the students with the rewards of sharing. Various sources (Performance Workshop Project Guide, n.d.; Schattner, 1967; Schmitz, n.d.) contain information specifically relevant to peformances by individuals with mental disabilities. Books on puppetry (Astell-Burt, 1981; Champlin, 1981) can also be particularly helpful for initial performance experiences. The use of puppets allows students to shine, even when they cannot speak for themselves or are afraid of risking personal exposure in performance.

Opportunities for persons to perform in theatre productions outside classrooms and for broader audiences have increased considerably within the past decade. The "Can-Do" theatre of Spokane, Washington, for instance, annually involves more than fifty disabled and non-disabled elementary students as performers in a production. The "Rainbow Company" children's theatre of Las Vegas, Nevada, has integrated youths with mental disabilities into touring productions that have received critical acclaim. As adults, talented persons with mental disabilities tour with groups such as "Access Theatre" of Santa Barbra, California, and "Theatre Unlimited" of San Francisco. "Famous People Players" of Toronto, Canada, is made up of

puppeteers with mental diasbilities who tour as paid professionals. While a career in professional theatre is not feasible for most of us (with or without a mental disability), the possibilities for persons with mental disabilities to become involved in theatre are not limited only to classrooms or other sheltered environments. Creative drama, then, is not only a means of instruction toward various expressive and creative goals; it is also an opportunity to begin participating in an increasingly accessible art form.

SUMMARY

Creative dramatics provides opportunities for students with mental disabilities to develop and practice basic skills in concrete ways and to work with others in a non-threatening atmosphere that stimulates aesthetic and creative abilities. It is an enjoyable activity that can reinforce lessons from other curricular areas while introducing students to a performing art.

The teacher, as leader of the creative dramatics exercise, participates as a member of the group, insuring that all are involved. Students and teacher alike develop characters who interact with one another, facing and resolving conflicts that arise. While the teacher initiates the exercise and introduces conflicts, the outcomes are determined by the students themselves, improvising solutions to challenges that arise.

Ideas for creative dramatics come from social situations, personal problems, career possibilities, other curricular areas, and pure fantasy. Through creative play, the students participate in a learning process that simultaneously engages the mind, the body, and the imagination.

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